

Literary Art

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

By

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## Abstract

This series of paintings is the product of a process of reading The Brothers Karamazov by Fyodor Dostoevsky and The Pilgrim's Progress by John Bunyan. After reading the novels, time was spent reflecting on prominent themes in each novel. Next, the themes were translated into sketches. Finally, the sketches were transformed into a series of four paintings. One motivation for this project was to interact with some engaging pieces of literature. Another motivation was to collect images and themes for a series of paintings. The final goal of this creative project was to gain insight into how literature could be integrated into a visual arts curriculum.

## Process

I began this project by choosing a few recommended novels that I wanted to read and react to. One reason I chose The Pilgrim's Progress and The Brothers Karamazov for this project was because they both contain spiritual themes. Some of these themes include man's depravity, faith, and the underlying theology and ideas of each author. John Bunyan was an evangelical Christian preacher and spent twelve years in prison for preaching when the government told him not to, during which time he wrote The Pilgrim's Progress. Likewise, Dostoevsky spent part of his life imprisoned for alleged subversion. I found this life experience shared by both authors to be another link between the two writers and their work.

Although The Brothers Karamazov is very different from The Pilgrim's Progress, both works displayed man's depravity. In The Brothers Karamazov, it is expressed everywhere from the behavior of Mr. Karamazov to the unjust punishment of Dmitry for a murder he did not commit. In The Pilgrim's Progress the depravity of man is expressed through the behavior of the inhabitants of Vanity Fair and through many of the characters Christian meets throughout his journey.

After reading the novels, I began to list and take notes on themes and relationships between the two works. I also read excerpts from a few literary critiques of each work. Next, I began to sketch scenes from the novel that were particularly expressive of the main characters and the plot. Most of my sketches were from my imagination, but I also found it helpful to have friends pose for me so that I could sketch from life. I then narrowed in on the most engaging compositions and transferred them to canvas.

After completing the paintings, I have gained new insight into how I might integrate literature into my future classroom. It was somewhat of a struggle to read the novel and figure out what was most important to portray. If a teacher were going to assign her students an art project to be created from a literary work, it would be wise to limit the decisions the student has to make. For example, the assignment could be to read the novel and choose the most intriguing character and paint about that character. Or, choose a scene from the novel that could be visually engaging to portray. It would also make sense to have the students go through the process of brainstorming lists of themes and relationships, rendering sketches, and finally working on canvas.

This project has been both exciting and frustrating. Painting figuratively is constantly a challenge, and as an artist I feel I have much to learn in this realm. Also,

transforming authors' words and my responses to reading experiences into images proved quite challenging. Too, the nature of the abstract themes in the work, namely faith and man's depravity, were difficult to portray.

## **Influences**

Some artists who have influenced my work include Pierre Bonnard and Dorothea Lange. Often I find myself creating compositions containing images within images, such as a room and window through which another view is present. I have observed that Bonnard often employs this technique in his work.

Dorothea Lange's photography quietly captures some very intense emotions and very real suffering of people, and I tried to do this in my work. Because I dealt with themes such as the death of a child, salvation, and grief in my paintings, I was also trying to capture some intense emotions. Throughout the process of this project, I also examined work by numerous Post-Impressionists including Vincent van Gogh and Paul Gauguin. I also examined work by Anselm Kiefer, a Post-modern, Post-Holocaust artist, and numerous others.

## **Acknowledgments**

Much appreciation is given to Nina B. Marshall for her sincere commitment to my development as a student, for her willingness to meet weekly to discuss this project, and the wealth of her knowledge of and experience with painting she shares with me. I want to thank Dr. Joanne Edmonds for her help in finding financial support used to buy the wonderful oil paints for this project and for the insight she gave during the planning stages of the design of this project. Also, thanks to the friends who spent time in my studio modeling for me.

## Artist's Statement

After reading The Pilgrim's Progress by John Bunyan and The Brothers Karamazov by Fyodor Dostoevsky, I chose to do a series of paintings based on some overlapping themes in the two novels. Some of the most prominent themes I found in both works of literature are journeys of faith, family ties, and sorrow over man's depravity.

The three paintings in this series based on The Brothers Karamazov deal mostly with the life of the main character, Alyosha Karamazov. In *The Brothers Get Acquainted* I wanted to bring the viewer into a very important scene in the novel. Alyosha, a mystic, and his brother Ivan, an intellectual, are meeting for lunch prior to Ivan's departure from their town. They discuss their views of life, God, and love. Although they are brothers, they have vastly different views, as I have found is true of many of my siblings, also. For this reason, I felt a personal tie to this scene and thus I chose to paint about it.

In *At Ilyusha's Bedside* the viewer again sees Alyosha spending time with people he loves. He and some of the boys from his village spend time with their young friend Ilyusha as he lies in bed dying. I chose to illustrate this part of the story because it gives the reader a glimpse into Alyosha's caring spirit and how his spirit is reflected in other people's lives.

The third painting from this novel, entitled *Alyosha's Struggle* is painted as if Alyosha were the viewer. In the novel all of his family members would often turn to him for support, whether it was Dmitry wanting to confide in him about his love for Grushenka or Ivan wanting to talk about his views on life. His illegitimate brother and the murderer of their father, Smerdyakov, is also shown in this piece. The woman is Katerina, a former lover of Dmitry and also one who looks to Alyosha for support. In the novel, Alyosha was continually journeying between life in a monastery and life with the people who needed him most, including family, friends, and other townspeople. Sometimes the needs of all the people were too much to bear.

The final painting in this series, *The Pilgrim's Progress* is based on the novel with the same title. I found the concept of Christian's allegorical journey from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City to be fascinating. He wrestles with a heavy burden and slowly comes to understand that his burden is sin. In the end, he finds solace and forgiveness, along with other believers he met along the way, in the Celestial City.

## Quotes posted during exhibit

### *The Pilgrim's Progress*

by John Bunyan

“Do you see yonder *Wicket Gate*? The man said, No: Then said the other, Do you see yonder Shining Light? He said, I think I do. Then said *Evangelist*, Keep that Light in your eye, and go up directly thereto, so shalt thou see the Gate; at which, when thou knockest, it shall be told thee what thou shalt do. So I saw in my dream that the Man began to run: Now he had not run far from his own door, but his Wife and Children perceiving it, began to cry after him to return; but the Man put his fingers in his ears, and ran on crying, *Life! Life! Eternal Life!* So he looked not behind him, but fled towards the middle of the Plain.” (p. 4)

“Sir, said *Christian*, I am a man that am come from the City of *Destruction*, and am going to the Mount *Zion*...” (p.25)

“I see myself now at the end of my Journey; my *toilsome* days are ended. I am going now to see *that* Head that was crowned with thorns, and *that* Face that was spit upon for me.

I have formerly lived by hear-say and Faith; but now I go where I shall live by Sight, and shall be with him in whose company I delight myself.

I have loved to hear my Lord spoken of; and where-ever I have seen the print of his shoe in the earth, there I have coveted to set my foot too.

His Name has been to me as a *civet-box*; yea, sweeter than all perfumes. His Voice to me has been most sweet; and his Countenance I have more desired than they that have most desired the light of the Sun. His Word I did use to gather for my food, and for antidotes against my faintings. He has held me, and I have kept me from mine iniquities; yea, my steps hath he strengthened in his Way.” (p. 378)

*The Brothers Karamazov*  
*by Fyodor Dostoevsky*

The Brothers Get Acquainted, Book V, Chapter III

“...I was thinking that even if I believed that life was pointless, lost faith in the woman I loved, lost faith in the order of things, or even became convinced that I was surrounded by a disorderly, evil, perhaps devil-made chaos, even if I were completely overcome by the horrors of human despair—I would still want to live on; once I have started drinking from this cup, I won’t put it down until I have emptied it to the last drop...Many times I’ve asked myself whether there is anything in the world that could crush my frantic, indecent appetite for life, and have decided that it looks as though nothing of the sort exists...Even if I do not believe in the divine order of things, the sticky young leaves emerging from their buds in the spring are dear to my heart; so is the blue sky and so are some human beings, even though I often don’t know why I like them...” (p. 275-276)

“You didn’t want to hear about God from me. You simply wanted to hear what your brother lives by, and now I’ve told you.” (p. 283)

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